DIGITIZED DESSERT The Kenmore 6633 lets you cook meals by entering a code from the box, though foods with those codes were difficult to find.

Microwave ovens

The best of these 'second ovens' are faster and friendlier, and start at less than $150

Any microwave can serve up popcorn and other snacks on Super Bowl Sunday. The latest also promise to make cooking main meals about as simple as nuking your favorite snacks. Our tests of more than 60 models include nine CR Best Buys.

Even heating and thorough defrosting make the new Kenmore 6633, $140, our top-scoring midsized countertop model. But most unique are its preprogrammed cooking codes for baby-back pork ribs, chicken parmigiana, and more than 100 other frozen meals.

Dubbed TrueCookPlus, the software adjusts heating according to a food code you punch in as well as to your home's altitude, based on your ZIP code. The feature worked in our initial tests. But Betty Crocker Warm Delights Minis cake is among the few foods so far with the code on the package, so you'll have to get other food codes off the Web (*www.truecookplus.com*).

You'll also find that halftime refers to more than football. Apollo claims its Half Time convection microwave cooks anything you'd cook in a conventional oven twice as fast. It beat a high-scoring range in our speed tests, but another convection microwave delivered crispier pizza. (See "Super Bowl Pizza Challenge," on facing page.) Months of testing yielded other ways to save on a microwave:

Get better browning for less. You'll find more lower-priced models with a grilling feature, which uses an electric element like the one in your oven's broiler. But you can still pay $600 or more for models that have it. A top midsized convection model that cost $250 and didn't have the grilling feature gave us crispy grilled-cheese sandwiches. You can also use the convection mode for browner, crispier chicken.

Microwaves can use 80 percent less energy than typical ovens.

Don't pay extra for racks. Most over-the-range models now include an upper rack that lets you cook several foods at once. The best we tested have that feature for as little as $260. Just be sure to check racked foods often for even cooking because they aren't on a moving turntable.

Skip these space savers. Unlike most microwave ovens, Sharp's $760 Insight Pro drawer model mounts under the counter to free up space and allow a range hood for optimal venting. Conveniences include a bevy of shortcut keys and a "keep warm" feature that maintains serving temperature for up to 30 minutes. But that pricey pro's heating evenness was only mediocre in our tests. Sharp's $380 Carousel R-1214, a built-in model, can hang under a wall cabinet. But defrosting was subpar.

How to choose

In addition to saving time, microwave ovens can also save up to 80 percent of the energy used by a typical oven. Indeed, the Environmental Protection Agency is considering making microwaves eligible for Energy Star status. See our Ratings and Recommendations on page 44 for models with top performance and value. Then use these tips to narrow your choices:

Pick the right type. Large countertop models often have more capacity than over-the-range models, though they take up valuable counter space. Over-the-range models free up that space by nestling conveniently above your range. But they cost more to buy and install, and they don't vent as well as most range hoods.

Focus on features. A sensor helps prevent under- or overcooking by automatically turning off the microwave when food is done. Shortcut keys take the guesswork out of cooking popular foods, and convection helps provide browning like a conventional oven does. Models with a mounting kit save counter space by hanging on the wall or beneath a wall cabinet.

Don't buy capacity claims. What you see on the box isn't what you'll get in your kitchen because manufacturers measure space you usually can't use. Some models delivered as little as half the space manufacturers promised. Check the usable-space column in our Ratings for our real-world measurements. And take your largest casserole to the store. Also consider models with a sliding tray, which can usually accommodate large or oblong plates.

FEATURES THAT COUNT

These add convenience and performance

Child lock. Makes controls inoperable when engaged. Found on all tested models except the Apollo (A7).

Convection mode. Helps brown and crisp food with circulating heated air. Usually found on pricier microwaves, as shown in the Ratings, though you don't have to pay top dollar to get it.

Shortcut keys. Automate the cooking time of popular foods by letting you simply press a button. All tested models have them for popcorn and other snacks; some have keys for grits and other fare.

Racks for bi-level cooking. Shown at right, these let you cook several foods at once, as long as the pans aren't too tall. Found on most tested over-the-range microwaves, as shown in the Ratings.

Sensor. Helps prevent under- and overcooking by turning off when food is done. On most tested models, as shown in the Ratings. Even with a sensor, check doneness with a thermometer to be safe.

Speed cook. Combines microwaves with convection and, often, halogen bulbs to speed cooking. Tested models that have it are noted in the Ratings. Two Whirlpool models (C8, C20) lack convection but use halogen bulbs for broiling foods.

Keep the kids safe. Microwave-related burns sent an estimated 2,000 children to the emergency room last year. A recent study by the University of Chicago Medical Center found that even toddlers could open microwaves and pull out hot foods and drinks, resulting in burns. All tested models except the Apollo Half Time include a child lock for the controls. To make your microwave safer, keep it out of reach of younger children. And be sure older kids use it properly and keep younger siblings away when handling hot foods and beverages from the microwave.

Super Bowl pizza challenge: Faster may not be better when you're feeding the fans

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL SMITH

Apollo claims its $200 Half Time convection microwave oven is "the only oven in the world" that cooks like a conventional range in half the time. With Super Bowl Sunday on the way, we decided to complement our beer Ratings, on page 7, by testing that claim against a stack of frozen 12-inch pizzas and our top-scoring smoothtop electric range.

The Half Time is, indeed, fast: just 13 minutes for pizza in its combination convection-microwave mode, compared with 39 minutes, including preheating, for the Electrolux EW30EF65G range on its nonconvection setting. Both pizzas were slightly browned, though neither was especially crispy.

Could the Half Time outrun other convection microwaves? We tried the Kenmore Elite 6428, $250, a CR Best Buy. Pizza took a bit longer—25 minutes—but emerged brown and crispy. Yet when it came to crispy pies, even the Kenmore microwave couldn't beat the Electrolux range in its convection mode, which served up the crispiest slices (at right in the photo) in 34 minutes.

Bottom line. The Half Time saves time, but it was hardly a touchdown compared with a convection range or our top-scoring convection microwave. And as the Ratings show, it also fumbled in our even-heating tests.

A1 Kenmore

Ratings Microwave ovens

In performance order, within types. (Types designated A, B, etc.)

● Excellent
◓ Very good
○ Good
◒ Fair
● Poor

Overview

A microwave is one appliance where you can save without sacrificing. Top-scoring models are also CR Best Buys. Most should be at stores through July 2009.

✔ CR Best Buy

These models offer the best combination of performance and price. All are recommended.

✔ Recommended

These are high-performing models that stand out for the reasons below.

Best midsized countertop models:

A1 Kenmore $140 **CR Best Buy**
A2 Kenmore $130 **CR Best Buy**
A3 Kenmore $250 **CR Best Buy**
A4 Panasonic $160 **CR Best Buy**

A1 cooked and defrosted evenly and has codes for corresponding foods, though few codes are on food packages. **A3** offers convection; **A4** cooked most evenly but defrosted less consistently.

Best large countertop models:

B1 GE $220
B2 Panasonic $150 **CR Best Buy**
B7 GE $200
B8 Kenmore $330 **CR Best Buy**
B9 LG $160

B1 and **B2** topped this category and offer the most usable space. Choose **B7** for its consistent performance, **B8** for its relatively low-priced convection option, and **B9** for its especially easy programming features.

Best over-the-range models:

C1 Samsung $300 **CR Best Buy**
C3 Kenmore $630
C6 GE $400
C7 Frigidaire $350 **CR Best Buy**
C14 Whirlpool $260 **CR Best Buy**
C15 LG $600

C1, **C7**, and **C14** offer the best blend of overall performance and value for the dollar. Paying more for **C3** and **C15** buys you speed-cooking and convection; all among this group except **C3** also offer stainless trim.

Recommendation	Rank	Brand & model **Similar models,** in small type, are comparable to tested model.	Price	Overall score 0 P | F | G | VG | E 100	Test results Evenness	Auto defrost	Ease of use	Capacity Claimed (cu. ft.)	Usable (cu. ft.)	Features Sensor	Convection	Speed cooking	Racks
	A	**MIDSIZED COUNTERTOP MODELS**											
✔	1	**Kenmore** (Sears) 6633[9]	$140	75	◓	●	●	1.2	0.8	•			
✔	2	**Kenmore** (Sears) 6325[2]	130	70	○	●	◓	1.2	0.9	•			
✔	3	**Kenmore** (Sears) Elite 6428[9]	250	63	○	◓	◓	1.0	0.7	•	•		
✔	4	**Panasonic** Inverter NN-SD697[S] 1	160	61	●	○	◓	1.2	0.7	•			
	5	**GE** Profile Spacemaker II PEM31DM[BB] 1	200	55	◓	●	◓	1.0	0.5	•			
	6	**Emerson** MW8115[SS]	65	53	○	◓	◓	1.1	0.7				
	7	**Apollo** Half Time Oven AAC-34S	200	51	◒	●	○	1.2	0.7		•	•	
	8	**Haier** MWG10081T[W]	140	50	○	◓	○	1.0	0.6		•	•	
	B	**LARGE COUNTERTOP MODELS**											
✔	1	**GE** Profile JES2251SJ[SS]	220	79	◓	●	●	2.2	1.5	•			
✔	2	**Panasonic** Inverter NN-T945[S]F 1	150	76	◓	◓	●	2.2	1.4	•			
	3	**Panasonic** Inverter NN-SD797[S] 1	180	73	◓	◓	●	1.6	0.9	•			
	4	**Panasonic** Prestige NN-SD997[S]	260	71	●	○	●	2.2	1.4	•			
	5	**Whirlpool** Gold GT4175SP[S]	300	71	◓	◓	◓	1.7	1.1	•			
	6	**Jenn-Air** JMC9158BA[B]	450	70	○	●	◓	1.5	1.1	•	•	•	
✔	7	**GE** Profile PEB2060DM[BB] 1 D	200	69	◓	◓	◓	2.0	1.2	•			
✔	8	**Kenmore** (Sears) Elite 6790[9]	330	68	◓	◓	●	1.5	1.1	•	•	•	
✔	9	**LG** LRM2060[ST]	160	68	◓	○	●	2.0	1.2	•			
	10	**Panasonic** Genius NN-T995[S]F 1 D	220	67	◓	◓	○	2.2	1.5	•			
	11	**Panasonic** NN-C994[S] 1 2	650	65	◓	○	●	1.5	1.2	•	•	•	
	12	**Frigidaire** Gallery GLMB209D[S]	250	65	●	◒	◓	2.0	1.2	•			
	13	**Sharp** Carousel R-520K[S]	170	64	○	◓	◓	2.0	1.2	•			
	14	**Kenmore** (Sears) Elite 6646[9]	170	64	○	◓	○	2.0	1.2	•			
	15	**Sanyo** EM-S9515[W]	130	60	◓	●	○	1.4	0.8				
	16	**GE** Profile PEB1590SM[SS]	360	55	◓	◒	○	1.5	1.1	•	•	•	
	17	**GE** JES1384[S]F 2	130	48	◓	●	○	1.3	0.8				
	C	**OVER-THE-RANGE MODELS**											
✔	1	**Samsung** SMH7187[STG]	300	78	◓	●	◓	1.8	0.8	•			•
	2	**Whirlpool** Gold GH4155XP[B]	470	77	◓	●	●	1.5	0.7	•			•
✔	3	**Kenmore** (Sears) Elite 8082[9]	630	76	◓	●	●	1.7	0.8	•	•	•	
	4	**Kenmore** (Sears) 8009[9]	450	75	○	●	●	2.0	1.1	•			•
	5	**Amana** AMV5206BA[B]	380	75	○	●	◓	2.0	0.9	•			•
✔	6	**GE** Adora DVM1850DM[BB]	400	73	◓	◓	●	1.8	0.9	•			•
✔	7	**Frigidaire** Professional PLMVZ169H[C]	350	73	◓	◓	◓	1.6	0.8	•			•
	8	**Whirlpool** Gold GH6177XP[B] 2	590	72	○	●	◓	1.7	0.9	•		•	•

A4 Panasonic

C1 Samsung

Recommendation	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score	Evenness	Auto defrost	Ease of use	Capacity: Claimed (cu. ft.)	Capacity: Usable (cu. ft.)	Features: Sensor	Features: Convection	Features: Speed cooking	Features: Racks
		Similar models, in small type, are comparable to tested model.		0 P | F | G | VG | E 100									
	C	**OVER-THE-RANGE MODELS** continued											
	9	**GE** Cafe CVM2072SM[SS]	$ 650	70	◓	○	●	2.0	0.9	•			•
	10	**Whirlpool** Gold GH5184XP[B]	410	70	○	●	◓	1.8	0.9	•			•
	11	**Electrolux** EI30BM55H[B]	750	70	○	●	◓	2.0	1.0	•			•
	12	**GE** JVM1850DM[BB]	420	70	◓	◓	●	1.8	0.9	•			•
	13	**LG** LMVM2277ST	800	69	◓	○	●	2.2	1.3	•			•
✔	14	**Whirlpool** MH2175XS[Q]	260	67	◓	◓	◓	1.7	0.8	•			•
✔	15	**LG** LMVH1750[ST]	600	67	◓	◓	●	1.7	0.8	•	•	•	
	16	**Maytag** MMV4205BA[B]	300	67	◓	●	◓	2.0	0.9				•
	17	**Whirlpool** Gold Velos GH7208XR[Q] 2	770	67	○	○	◓	2.0	1.1	•	•	•	•
	18	**Whirlpool** MH1170XS[B]	300	67	○	●	◓	1.7	0.9				•
	19	**Sharp** Insight R-1880LS 2	550	67	◓	◓	●	1.1	0.7	•	•	•	
	20	**Whirlpool** Gold Velos GH6208XR[B] 2	690	67	○	○	◓	2.0	1.1	•		•	•
	21	**KitchenAid** KHHC2090S[BL] 2	1,000	66	●	○	◓	2.0	1.1	•	•	•	
	22	**LG** LMV2083[ST]	370	66	◓	○	●	2.0	0.9	•			•
	23	**Whirlpool** MH3185XP[B] D MH3184XP[ ]	400	64	◓	○	●	1.8	0.9	•			•
	24	**GE** Profile Spacemaker JVM1790[B]K	650	64	○	◓	◓	1.7	0.8	•	•	•	•
	25	**Bosch** HMV930[5]	500	63	○	◓	◓	1.8	0.8	•			•
	26	**Maytag** MMV5207BA[B]	430	62	◒	◓	◓	2.0	1.4	•			•
	27	**GE** JVM1665[D]N 2	500	62	○	◓	◓	1.6	0.7	•			•
	28	**GE** JVM1750DM[BB]	300	62	◓	○	◓	1.6	0.8	•			•
	29	**Jenn-Air** JMV9169BA[B] 2	750	62	○	◓	◓	1.6	0.8	•	•	•	
	30	**LG** LMVM2085[ST]	520	61	◓	◒	●	2.0	0.9	•			•
	31	**Hotpoint** RVM1535DM[WW]	170	60	◓	◓	○	1.5	0.9				
	32	**GE** Advantium 120 SCA1001K[SS] 2	780	56	○	○	◓	1.4	0.7	•	•	•	
	33	**Sharp** Carousel R-1520L[K]	250	55	○	◒	◓	1.5	0.9	•			
	34	**Kenmore** (Sears) 8004[9]	300	52	○	◒	●	1.6	0.7	•			
	D	**BUILT-IN MODELS**											
	1	**Sharp** Insight Pro KB6025M[S] 3	760	68	○	◓	◓	1.0	0.9	•			
	2	**Sharp** Carousel R-1214 4	380	55	◓	◒	◓	1.5	0.9	•			

D Discontinued, but similar model is available. 1 Has wall-mounting kit. 2 Has grilling feature. 3 Built-in drawer. 4 Mounts under wall cabinet.

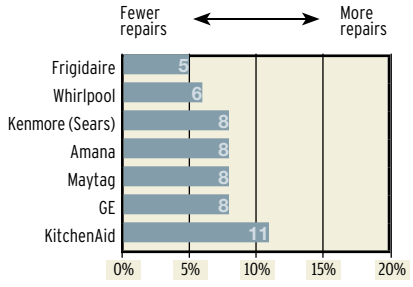
Guide to the Ratings

Overall score is mainly cooking evenness, defrosting, and ease of use. Displayed scores are rounded; models are listed by precise overall score. **Evenness** is uniform heating of cold mashed potatoes. **Auto defrost** is how completely and evenly this program defrosted 1 pound of frozen ground beef. **Ease of use** is ease of setting without owner's manual. **Capacity** claimed is per manufacturer; usable is based on our measurement of what fits on turntable or sliding tray. **Price** is approximate retail. Under **brand & model,** color code is bracketed. Note all tested over-the-range models are 30 inches wide. Note that overall scores for previously tested models may have changed because of changes in test methodology.

Most and least reliable

KitchenAid has been among the most repair-prone brands of over-the-range microwave ovens. That's what we found when we asked 25,697 readers who bought an OTR microwave between 2004 and 2008 about their experiences. The graph shows the percentage of brands that were ever repaired or had a serious problem. Differences of less than 5 points aren't meaningful, and we've adjusted the data to eliminate differences linked solely to age. Models within a brand might vary, and design or manufacturing changes might affect future reliability. Still, choosing a brand with a good repair history can improve your odds of getting a reliable model.

Over-the-range microwaves



Source: Annual Product Reliability Survey, Consumer Reports National Research Center.

DID YOU KNOW?

39 hours

That's how much time you could save each year by cooking one meal a week in a microwave oven for 15 minutes instead of in an electric oven for 1 hour because microwaves heat food much more quickly. You'll even pocket a few bucks in energy savings (about $8 over electric ovens, $6 over gas ovens) because microwave ovens use less electricity.